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ABSTRACT

The recent interest in setting minimal educational standards arises partially from the success of the educational system at providing 75 percent of the population with high school diplomas. Previously, a major goal for the system was high school graduation for as many people as possible. Now that that goal is approximated, a new goal takes its place: that of raising the standards of achievement for high school graduates. The goal of raising the grade level the average person attains is at times in conflict with the goal of increasing the overall level of educational achievement. Thus, the former must be achieved before the latter can be attempted. Policy goals for the system are always, in practice, minimal standards because ideal goals can never be fully achieved. For instance, the goal of educating children to their fullest potential can be striven for but never reached. However, the goal can be used to identify failures, or point out that the system is only educating children to an unnacceptable level of their potential. And thus this goal can help identify when minimal standards are not being met. The movement to establish minimal standards stems from a need for more efficient management of the system. (Author/JM)

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Minimal Educational Standards: A Systematic Perspective

by

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A background paper prepared for the Minimal Competency Workshops sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the National Institute of Education.

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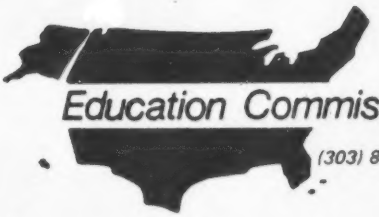

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Minimal Educational Standards:

A Systemic Perspective

Thomas F. Green: Syracuse University

Issues surrounding the imposition of minimal standards in education are of clear public concern. But a mere ten or twelve years ago they were hardly discernable in the public agenda. Why? Is there something about our recent experience that would account for the currency of such concerns? Why do these issues arise, and why do they arise now? If the expanding development of minimum standards provides the solution to important problems, then what are those problems and how were they created? Are they new problems? Or are they merely old problems that, for some reason, appear now in a new guise? And if it is indeed among the ironies of history that the solution of problems in human affairs has chiefly the consequence of producing still others, then we want to ask what problems are likely to be created by the extension of minimum state standards in education?

These are the kinds of questions that I wish to address. Answering them is unlikely to provide specific guidance either for implementing or administering minimum state standards in education. It will not, for example, provide decisive solution to the important but technical problems of measurement and definition required for evaluating educational accomplishments. Neither will it provide an appropriate political strategy for determining minimal levels of achievement. My purpose is more limited than that, in any case. It

is simply to offer a useful perspective, a point of viewing within which it is possible to place the movement for establishing minimum standards in some relation not only to historical experience, but also in relation to other problems facing the educational system and to other social interests than those of educators. Such a perspective is insufficient to determine choice. But, on the other hand, choice without it is likely to be less wise. It is not everything we need, but having it may help us hedge our bets. It may improve our capacity to anticipate what might otherwise be unanticipated consequences of decisions.

The pursuit of perspective, however, can be an endless effort. One may never get beyond it. It needs some limits, lest we never reach the necessities of decision. I shall therefore confine these remarks to three propositions that seem to me especially relevant. The first is that the long-standing social goal of increasing levels of educational attainment is in fundamental conflict with the equally desireable goal of increasing levels of achievement. I do not mean to suggest that these goods are in conflict all the time in every respect. My claim is the more modest one that they will tend to conflict under certain conditions in ways that will be decisive for the course of policy decision. Grasping this point, I believe, will help to explain why issues of minimum standards become serious only at certain times.

My second point is that goals that we express in policy for the system are always minimal standards because in the social practice of the system -- as opposed to the theory of its management -- they operate always as measures of failure rather than as standards of success. Standards are always standards of adequacy, never of excellence, in the case of educational policy. But the threshold of failure is always changing. Grasping this point will help, I believe, in seeing how minimum standards are likely to function in the administration of the system and how their establishment becomes an especially appropriate concern of the state.

Finally, I wish to examine the claim that minimum standards are unlikely to succeed unless they are underwritten by appropriate and successful political arguments. Grasping the implications of this truism will help us, I hope, to understand what has changed in the political climate of educational policy so as to make such issues especially serious.

However, as long as these propositions stand without elaboration, they stand also without clarity. Let us consider each of them.

I

The Transition from Attainment to Achievement

For more than sixty years it has been the fundamental aim of American educators and the dominant mission of their political supporters to raise the level of educational

attainment for each generation to the point of near universal completion at the twelfth grade. Those who graduated from high school, and are now in their mid-sixties, will no doubt remember a school at a time when they were among a very select twenty-five per cent of their generation who graduated. Those graduates who are now in their early fifties were probably part of a select forty-five per cent of their peers, and their parents were probably among a very elite eight per cent. Not until 1940 did as many as half of each generation complete the twelfth grade. Now, however, roughly three-quarters are completing the twelfth grade of the American educational system.

In addition to this remarkable record of growth, a record unparalleled in the developed countries of the world, we should note that since about 1965 the growth in this rate of educational attainment has ceased. The attainment rate at the twelfth grade has stablized. Furthermore, this "levelling off" has occurred despite the most massive efforts that we have ever mounted in the effort to increase it.

TABLE I

Per Cent of 17 year-olds Completing Twelfth Grade

1910	8.8	1950	59.0	1969	75.7
1920	16.8	1960	65.1	1970	75.7
1930	29.0	1965	76.3	1972	75.9
1940	50.8	1967	76.5	1973	74.8

But what is the significance of these facts? I invite your consideration. In a society where only a few complete

high school, say less than 30%, the remainder are unlikely to be severely disadvantaged. Surely, in such a society tenacity, guts, inventiveness, perhaps miserliness, and certainly long life, "good connections", and just plain luck are likely to be much more significant than educational attainment in determining the life chances of people. Under such conditions, even if it be granted that those who do not complete high school do well enough, it may still become evident that those who do graduate, on the whole, do somewhat better. If that "doing better" is marked and plain to a great many people, then there comes to be established that belief, so familiar to us all, with higher levels of educational attainment there come also greater opportunities. Higher educational attainment pays off.

This association between educational attainment, on the one hand, and access to the social goods of life, on the other hand, is a firmly entrenched belief in the American consciousness. If higher educational attainment benefits the individual in his quest for the social goods of life, if, in short, it benefits individuals in the American pursuit of happiness, then it becomes not simply a desireable goal but a fundamental rule of justice that everyone should be permitted to reach as high a level of the educational system as they can. The expansion of educational attainment becomes then a fundamental requirement of educational policy. That is why, for the past sixty years at least, it has been a central purpose

of educational policy to raise the levels of educational attainment for each generation of Americans to at least the level of universal completion of high school.

But peculiar things are bound to happen in any society as it approaches the realization of such a goal. In a society where only one out of ten young people finish high school, employers are unlikely to use high school completion as the screen for either job entrance, job security, or job advancement. But when three out of four have completed high school, then the one who has not is likely to fare badly in the search for employment. In short, the so-called problem of credentialism cannot arise except in a society where lots of people have credentials. We may put the point in another way. To the best of my knowledge the so-called drop-out problem was never viewed as a problem in the United States until the mid-50's. By that time, curiously enough, the attainment rate at the 12th level of the American system had passed 60%. Our experience has been that the drop-out problem comes into existence and intensifies as the number of drop-outs declines. Being a drop-out is nothing new, but the seriousness of it is new. When there are lots of drop-outs being one is no problem. When there are few, being one can be a disaster. The problems of credentialism and the problems of the drop-out are partly, perhaps even largely, a consequence of the tenacious pursuit of ever expanding levels of educational attainment.

But that is not all that has been produced by the remarkable success of the American educational enterprise. A society where everybody attains a certain level of the educational system, can no longer distribute social benefits on the basis of attainment at that level. Under those conditions there no longer are any relative advantages to be gained by attainment at that level. Difficulties arise as we approach the point where every member of a generation completes the twelfth grade. At that point, the relative benefits to be derived from success approach zero and the relative liabilities for failure escalate rapidly. Though no special benefit can be gained for completing high school, everything can be lost by failing to do so. It turns out then that what could have been undertaken to secure a good must now be undertaken simply to avoid disaster.

This perspective is especially poignant for minority groups. They are typically the last to benefit from the educational system, and not simply in this country, but in virtually every developed country of the world. And they typically seek to benefit from education in the same ways as their predecessors benefitted. The irony is that they cannot do so. For their predecessors, education was a good; higher levels of attainment brought benefits; but for them it is merely a necessity. For others it paid; for them it merely helps to avoid unmitigated disaster. Psychically, this represents a profound change in the value of educational attainment at the high school level.

These are the forces that give special importance to the fact that the attainment rate of high school completion has reached the point of 75% and has leveled off. The society has reached the point where it can no longer award its benefits on the basis of educational attainment at the 12th level of the system. It can only withhold them from those who fail. In any society faced with these circumstances only a few choices remain. We can retain our firm conviction that higher rates of educational attainment should be extended and thus render it compulsory for people to reach levels of the system beyond the high school. But we needn't take that path. Instead, and this is the more likely direction, we can retain our cherished belief in the value of education for the pursuit of happiness by refining the meaning of educational attainment. If we cannot discriminate between people on the basis of the level of the system that they attain, nonetheless, we can discriminate between them on the basis of how that level was reached. In other words, we have reached a point in the development of education in which we discover that it is not the level of the system that matters, but the quality of the education pursued in reaching that level.

This is the shift of policy from a focus on expanding educational attainment to improving educational achievement. The focus of policy -- its main weight -- must shift from an emphasis on increasing attainment to an emphasis on increasing

achievement. But the exact meaning of this shift in emphasis needs further clarification.

It should be clear that by educational attainment I mean simply to refer to the last level completed within the educational system. By educational achievement, however, I mean to refer to some standard of what is learned. A person may attain at the twelfth level of the system even though achieving only at the eighth level, and conversely a person may have attained only the tenth level of the system and may nonetheless have achieved at the twelfth level. All certificates, diplomas, and the like, issued by the system, are certificates of attainment. Scores on tests of achivement or on measures of performance are certificates of achievement.

In speaking of minimum standards for the educational system, we are speaking of measures of achievement or standards of achievement that must be satisfied by anyone who is to be regarded as attaining at a particular level of the system. Thus, the movement to introduce such minimum standards has the effect of tying educational attainment, at least at certain levels of the system, to certificates of achievement. Thus, the significant consequence of introducing minimum standards is to tie educational attainment to educational achievement so that <u>attainment</u> at a certain level of the system will take on a new meaning. And that new meaning has a very old social function. The new meaning is that <u>attaining</u> a certain level of the system is now testimony that one has

satisfied a certain level of achievement.

Whereas before we were in a position to reward persons differentially on the basis of educational attainment. The introduction of minimum standards will now put us in a position to reward them, in some degree, on the basis of achievement. By tying these two measures together in a more refined way than in the past, what we accomplish is the restoration of the relative value of attainment. In other words, the introduction of minimum standards of achievement (at least for exit from the system) is the social equivalent of adding another level to the system. There are, in effect, not only those who finish the twelfth grade, but also those who do so with a certain standard of performance. Such standards will have the same social function as measures of attainment. Introducing such standards does not change the system. It merely permits it to function as it has in the past, but in a somewhat more refined manner.[1] It preserves the old social functions of the system, allowing the more precise allocation of persons to roles in institutions outside of the system.

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1. Whether such refinement is desireable is, it seems to me, doubtful. When the capabilities of persons are precisely tested by the educational system, they are likely to have less opportunity to test those capacities in ordinary life. When certificates and the like have no clear meaning, except attainment, they can be used less successfully in matching persons to opportunities within institutions outside the educational system. It is easy, in short,

In providing higher and higher levels of educational opportunity to more and more people, the American Educational Enterprise is the most successful in the world. But its success is based upon self-liquidating values. That is to say the social beliefs and the values that have lent impetus and urgency to the expansion of educational attainment are values that must necessarily be rendered in a new form as success is approached. The situation is analogous to the kind of ethos that served so well to settle the frontier in America. The beliefs and moral qualities that were so essential to taming the frontier are not necessarily the most appropriate ones to inculcate after the frontier is settled. And similarly, the effort to spread the benefits of education by expanding educational attainment is a serviceable policy at certain stages in the expansion of the system. But as success is approached, something must change.

It is unlikely, for example, that a curriculum serving the needs of 10% of the population will be adequate when the educational system must serve 75%. Something must change. The curriculum -- what is learned -- will have to be

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1. (cont) to reach a point of too great clarity in the meaning of educational achievement. Educational certificates should be vague and quite substantially so. Furthermore, it is worth considering that it will be easier for many to live in the kind of world where they are openly treated unjustly than it will be for them to live in a world where they are openly declared to be incompetent or inadequate.

differentiated to fit persons of different experiences, different interests, and different capacities. Any single certificate of attainment is bound to become increasingly unclear in its meaning as the system expands. Clearly, through the fifties and sixties the focus of our national attention was on increasing the levels of attainment. The drop-out problem was a central concern. It was not the only one, of course, but it was a weighty one. And so educators responded by developing programs designed to retain students. They differentiated approaches to reach high school completion. And that emphasis extended into the present decade in the development of alternative schools, experienced based credit, and a great variety of other devices. It is inevitable that if the system is to continue to expand the rates of attainment and to serve American ideals in the future as it has in the past, then our very success will force a redefinition and a reevaluation of what we take to be the worth of educational attainment and the essential content of the curriculum. In short, the emphasis on attainment has conflicted with the insistence on standards and a uniform meaning of educational certificates, and that conflice and redefinition of American ideals, is what, I believe, we are witnessing in the movement to introduce minimum state standards.

But it is not clear how that movement will change the social functions and the operation of the educational system

in any significant way. I have suggested that it will not change it much. The increasing vagueness of educational attainement standards, the intensification of the drop-out problem, the rise of credentialism, the perceived irrelevance of educational attainment as a measure of competence outside the system -- all these, I have argued arise as a consequence of the very success of the system in expanding the levels of educational attainment. The secondary system is now virtually complete in reaching that long-standing American goal of universal secondary education. And with that success come the problems we currently face. Indeed, it can be argued that success is the very thing that has produced such problems. That is the irony of the American experience.

II

Minimum Standards and the Threshold of Failure

My second point has to do with a little understood way in which goals for the educational system come to be established and how they become transformed, through time, into the functions of the educational system. To gain an understanding of this point, we may begin with a distinction between general goals and specific goals of the system.

General Goals and Specific Goals: By general goals I refer to such aspirations as the intention to educate each child to the fullest of his potential; and by specific goals

I refer to such concrete declarations as the intention to increase the reading scores for children in a certain school by one grade point within one year. Specific goals always designate a time when the goal is to be attained. They are also expressed so that what constitutes their attainment is clearly specified and so that the magnitude of any "falling short" can be determined. General goals, in contrast, are never formulated so that it is possible to tell when the goal has been attained, how far we are short of its attainment or when it is to be achieved. There is, in principle, no way that any school can tell that it is producing (now) good citizens (for the future) or that it is educating children to their fullest potential. The first of these goals is indefinite in specifying the relevant future and there is nothing that could constitute the attainment of the second because presumably there is nothing that anyone has learned, about which one cannot have learned more. No conceivable improvement in the techniques of measurement will suffice to transform either of these general goals into specific targets.

Because of these intrinsic difficulties in the formulation of general goals, it has been argued that they are useless in providing guidance either for schools or school systems. All such goals, it is suggested, should be abandoned and replaced by specific targets that can be monitored and that can be known to have been achieved or to have remained unattained by

some definable margin. That intellectual move is basic to the accountability movement in American education, and also to the development of State-assessment programs and the effort to introduce the techniques of modern management into the educational system.

I wish to suggest, however, that this move rests on a mistaken conception of the logic of general goals and their function within the social control of the system. We may not know when we are educating children to their fullest potential, but there are circumstances in which virtually everyone will agree that we are failing to do so. It may seem that if we can agree on when we are failing, then we should be able to agree on when we are succeeding. That inference, however, simply doesn't follow. It rests upon an erroneous view of the social function of general educational goals, their relation to specific goals, and their relation to the different and conflicting interests reflected in the system.

It is not the function of general educational goals to establish what we are to count as a good, much less the "best," state of affairs. It is their function to tell us what we are to count as relevant in advancing the judgment that things have gotten intolerably bad. If we are able to view the social utility of general educational goals in this way, then we shall see that they serve their function tolerably well. They are usually invoked, and perform their function, not when we have

fallen somewhat short of what is "good" or "best," but when we have fallen short of what is acceptable. That is the time when general goals are invoked, and at such times they suffice to establish quite specific targets. The general principle that we should educate each child to his fullest potential means that the curriculum should not be too narrow, the facilities should not be too impoverished and standards should not be too low. Never mind that the phrases "too narrow," "too impoverished," and "too low" are left undefined. They will be defined differently in different circumstances. But the point is that they <u>are</u> defined, they are defined in specific settings, and they are defined always in respect to what falls short of the acceptable and not in relation to what falls short of the best. When the interests of parents are provoked they will be saying things like "Add a French class" (the curriculum is too narrow) or "Add a science lab" (the facilities are too impoverished) or "Don't underestimate our kids" (the standards are too low).

Such appeals are specific enough. They are about as specific as anyone can reasonably expect from the expression of generally informed and benevolent parental interests. And they constitute a covert formulation of the general criticism to the schools "You are not doing as much as you should for our children." And this, in turn is only another way of saying "You should seek to educate our children to the fullest of their potential." It is not the import of such a message to

say to the schools, "You are not doing the best that can be done" since presumably that is always true. Rather it is the import of such a message that it is unacceptable and in what respects it is unacceptable. In short, general goals operate effectively in the establishment of specific targets provided we recognize that their function is to provide criteria for determining what kinds of arguments will constitute serious charges of failure. Specific educational goals are derived from general educational goals through a social process in which there is produced a definition of what constitutes not the best, but the worst that is acceptable. To suppose that specific goals for the system can or must be generated independently of general goals is to succumb to a most fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of educational goals.

It is important to keep in mind that in this analysis, I am concerned with the nature of systemic goals, not the goals that particular individuals, or even small academic departments might set for themselves. Individuals and even small groups of people may set goals for themselves on the assumption that they are doing fairly well already but can undertake certain steps that will result in doing somewhat better in the future. Indeed, I have been known to set such goals for myself. But the sum of all such individually established goals do not add up to the goals for an entire school or college, to say nothing of the system as a whole. The claim being advanced here is that specific goals for a

large unit or for the system as a whole are derived from shared ideals or general goals through a social process in which various interests are expressed in ways that define the threshold of the unacceptable.

Note: Nowhere is there an educational institution or an educational system whose members could not, of an evening, by simply taking thought, develop a rationally intelligible and socially defensible set of goals for the institution. The task, viewed as an intellectual problem, is not difficult. But it is also futile unless there is a social process by which the goals that each individual sets for himself and for the institution can be translated into the goals of the institution. The argument advanced here is that the process will either be the expression of a single will, and therefore the product of strong, central, and authoritative leadership or it will be a process in which the interplay of interests is permitted to define objectives through the detailed specification of what is unacceptable. The claim is that even within the most centralized systems there are few opportunities for the mere imposition of goals upon the system. There are no kings and queens of education. Even the Gods of government bestow their blessings upon the various tribal enclaves of the system not by some mere impulse of whimsy, but to accord with how they view the shifting interplay of interests.

The view presented here is that the dependence of specific systemic goals upon general goals is not a logical dependence,

but a kind of dependence that emerges from the social process by which specific targets are set. The function of general goals in that social process is to provide the critera of relevance in arriving at any judgment that the system in some respects is doing badly. From this perspective, it turns out that such generally accepted aspirations for the system as developing good citizens, stimulating creativity, developing economic independence, encouraging all the potentialities of children -- these aspirations do get translated into specific goals. It is a relevant criticism of the schools to say that the curriculum is too narrow, the facilities too impoverished, or the standards too low, because such criticisms can be linked to an appeal to general goals. But it is not a relevant criticism of the schools that they do not assure election to public office for students of political science nor financial security for students of business. That is not a criticism that can be linked to any general goals of the system and therefore cannot be regarded as a relevant failure.

It may be a peculiarity of educational goals for the system that they are defined not out of agreement on what is good, better, and best, but out of agreement on what is bad, worse, and absolutely intolerable. The irony is that currently in the United States there are extensive efforts to secure better sources of information about schools and their performance (State assessment) in order to establish more rational decision making, especially in the allocation of

resources. Insofar as those efforts contain reference to goals, they are usually defined along the continuum of good, better and best in ways appropriate to an industrial management system. If I am correct in these observations about educational goals, then this movement will, in the end, simply provide more effective means of monitoring the minimal standards. They will begin in an effort to move from good to better to best, and end by merely defining more clearly when and where things are bad, worse, and absolutely intolerable.

The Hierarchy of Minimal Standards: In respect to standards, the interests of the State are minimal in scope, but maximal in power and aggregation. By contrast, the interests of parents typically, in respect to standards, are maximal in scope, and minimal in power and aggregation. In short, from parental interests comes the desire that things go very well indeed for their own children, but the interests of the state result in the desire that things not go very badly, on the whole. But how can such phrases as "very well indeed" and "not very badly on the whole" be defined? Obviously, the specific content given to these phrases must change through time.

Though it is in the interests of parents to secure the best that is possible for their children, and in the interests of the state to secure the minimum necessary for everyone, still, the specific meaning of "best" emerges from reflection on the minimum tolerable. But here again, the conception of that minimum may change in time and place. If we have a society

(or community) in which everyone learns to read, then the fact that few find pleasure in it, may be regarded as intolerable. In those circumstances the schools might be urged to undertake the responsibility of teaching so that reading is enjoyed. Such a goal is not required to meet the compelling interests of the State, though it may clearly accord with the interests of parents. It can be viewed as a societal interest.

But if we have a society in which substantial numbers of students are penalized because they do not learn to read even in the literal sense of functional literacy, then the fact that few enjoy reading is likely to be regarded as tolerable and the minimal responsibilities of schools are unlikely to include such a goal either for parents or for the state. And if children in school have neither security of person nor property, then even the teaching of basic literacy is likely to give way to other goals, although in these latter circumstances it may be doubted whether the goals can be construed as "educational goals" in any sense at all.

The Transformation of Goals to Functions: Thus, we see that what constitutes the minimum acceptable standards for either parents or the state may change. But is there some underlying principle that serves to establish that progression or hierarchy of minimal acceptable standards.[5] The underlying

5. There was a time in the history of American education when it would have been regarded as absolutely intolerable that people complete their schooling without a working knowledge of the scriptures.

principle is that nothing can be a goal in education, or in any other precinct of life, if it is already attained. It cannot be my goal to get up this morning. I have already done it. On the other hand, it might be my goal to go to bed early tonight. However obvious this point may seem, it is important nonetheless because it helps us to understand why the function of educational goals is to define the terms of failure rather than success. This is one of the reasons why the general goals of the system are stable. No matter how well the schools may do, they will never attain their general goals. Such goals always assure us that there is more to be done.

There is, however, a second principle in this dynamic of goals and interests, and it may very well be decisive for understanding the control of the system. That principle can be discerned somewhat as follows. The compelling interests of the state are limited to minimal needs, although we recognize also that the derived interests of the state can be extended indefinitely into the control of the system. Similarly, though the interests of parents are always more than minimal, likewise there is no limit to their extent. Whatever is achieved, they can always seek to achieve more. But now we see that what parents regard as the threshold of the intolerable may also change.

Within the United States I suspect that the three R's plus a certain kind of citizenship education fall within the

set of minimal skills. They are the skills and dispositions that, on the whole, are most central to the interests of the state, the society, and parents, as well. But there is some evidence that a substantial part of the American people believe that in these basic areas of education, the schools can be successful. Thus, these attainments get transformed from goals for the system into functions of the system. This principle that goals get transformed into functions is a direct corollary of the analytic principle that nothing can be a goal if it is already attained. The importance of this corollary lies in the fact that the failure to perform the functions of the school will be uniformly regarded as more serious than a failure to meet the goals of the system. Failure to discharge its functions will imperil the legitimacy of the system itself whereas failure to meet its goals is unlikely to have any such serious consequences.

This last observation is of exceptional importance. Both the goals of the system and the functions of the system are likely to be raised as the system becomes more and more successful. And although it may be in the interests of parents to seek the best they can secure for their own children, it is not in their interests to permit the state to define that "best." Yet, as goals for the schools become the functions of the system, the discharge of those functions tends to fall more and more within the legitimate reach of the state's interests to secure because their attainment becomes more

serious, more compelling, more minimally necessary. Meeting the basic functions of the system is a requirement that falls within the compelling interests of the state to assure. Meeting the goals of the system has no such serious consequences. Thus, as the system grows, as it becomes more successful, the reach of the state is likely to extend more and more into the areas characteristic of the interests of parents. There is likely to emerge a conflict of interests. The adjustment of that conflict is likely to extend the role of the state in proportion as it results in an extension of the state's legitimate and compelling interests.

We may therefore anticipate this problem in the establishment and administration of state mandated minimum standards. What one community will regard as minimally satisfactory, another may regard as quite beyond what is necessary and far beyond what is within reach, and still others may regard as quite within the realm of disaster. Not only does the threshold of failure change through time, but it will also differ, no doubt, from one to another community. It is the state's prerogative to assure performance of the barest functions of the system. But the barest functions of the system are defined by what is already demonstrably achieveable. Therefore, lest insurrountable political problems are created, the minimum standards that the state establishes are unlikely to greatly exceed the settled expectations that prevail in that community with the lowest achievements. Minimum standards, in short are

likely to be lower than those that would be and are already established by the vast majority of the communities in the state.

III

Minimum Standards and the Political Arguments for the System

The imposition of minimum standards can only be as successful as durable and as credible as the political arguments offered in their support. We may test the adequacy of those arguments by examining the rank order of the political arguments that may generally be offered for the support of the system. That rank order is roughly as follows. (1) The political support for the system is secure when it rests solidly and evidently upon the fundamental or compelling interests of the state. (2) It is also strong when it rests upon the aggregate of individual or parental interests. (3) It is less strong when it rests entirely upon social interests, and (4) weakest when it must rely upon the quest for educational goods for their own sake. Under which of these types of arguments do we find the political case for the imposition of minimum standards? To answer this question let us consider in more detail the rank order that I have set out.

We may begin with the claim that whenever the support of education can be directly related to satisfying a compelling interest of the state, the political argument for the system is very strong. Whenever the spread of educational benefits

can be linked as means to the preservation of national defense or national security, for example, -- as in the passage of the National Defense Education Act -- the political argument for the spread of such benefits is very strong indeed. Similarly, the political argument is strong whenever the spread of such goods can be persuasively linked to the maintenance of civic order or to the enhancement of individual economic independence. To subsume the advancement of education or its improvement under any of these fundamental state interests is sufficient to produce political support for teaching everything from religion, ethics, languages and history to race relations, the practical skills of the trades, ordinary business practices, and even cooking.

Indeed, such an argument is strong enough to enlist political support for almost any effort -- regardless of its cost -- even if it has nothing to do with the spread of educational goods. The enormous expense of constructing the Interstate Highway System in the United States, for example, was made politically palatable, in part, by its conception as essential to national defense. The original construction of the railroads, at vastly greater costs than necessary, was made possible largely on similar grounds, and nobody can doubt that the development of the space program was solidly grounded in what were construed to be the compelling interests of the state. That kind of political argument, persuasively advanced, could be used as well for the support of symphony

orchestras and art galleries as for schools and research laboratories.

But political arguments for the system need not be rooted in the compelling interests of the state. They may rest in an appeal to social goods instead. Educational benefits can be construed as public or social benefits. We do not ordinarily support education simply because we believe it is necessary for society itself. We may support it rather because we believe it is necessary for a good society, a free society or a humane society. But there is a problem in this perspective. Even though we may acknowledge that education is a public good, still, nobody ever has sought to get an education for that reason. We can admit enough that society will be better off if it has enough plumbers and enough people who know the calculus. Yet, I doubt that anyone has ever struggled to master the jute and the lead or differential equations because of the belief that in doing so he is improving society.

From one point of view, the advancement of educational benefits is a social good. But nobody seeks to secure such goods for that reason. For example, nobody pays and perseveres through four years at Colgate University because doing so is good for Colgate even though it is good for Colgate that some do so. And if we can be sure of that, then we may be equally sure that nobody does it because doing it is good for American Society even though it is good for American Society that they do so. Rather, in seeking education we seek something in it

that is good for us, and good for us as quite specific individuals. We seek education because it is a private good. It increases our opportunities. It is just plain fun. It increases our enjoyment. Through it, we gain first access and then advancement in a profession. In short, the spread of educational benefits is a public good, but we seek to secure such goods because they are private and purely individual goods.

There is, in this arrangement, a peculiar and quite old-fashioned harmony. By the pursuit of our own individual interests, we advance a public good; and by promoting a public good, we increase the opportunities of individuals to pursue their own private interests. Thus, in a society where everyone seeks his own advantage through the acquisition of educational benefits, a substantial constituency is created. The aggregate of such individual, private or parental interests will add up to political support for the system. In pursuit of their own good, for example, youth may attend college. In doing so, they support the system, and help to make it possible for those who follow to pursue their own good. Colgate University continues to exist only because there are those who, seeking their own good, support it.

But that is not all. Externalities and appropriable goods are also created by the resulting spread of educational benefits. In a society where everyone can read, there is more to read and the quality of what is printed may rise. That is

a long-term externality, a social good produced by the spread of educational benefits. There is thus created also a set of appropriable goods. Merchants of the printed page, of all varieties, are likely to then have a private, individual, though admittedly long-term interest in the further spread of educational benefits. Children learn music, and the externalities of enlarged, if not elevated, sensibilities benefit everyone presumably. But those who gain the appropriable benefits of such externalities are the manufacturers and marketers of records, guitars, recorders and stereo sets. They then have at least an incipient interest in supporting the system. Therefore, to those who will support the system out of parental interests -- that is, because it advances their own or their childrens' good -- we may add those who see the system as creating appropriable goods. The two groups together constitute a large constituency, of uneven fidelity, ready to support the system on grounds of largely private interests.

Thus, through the externalities of the system, the creation of appropriable goods, and the encouragement of individuals to pursue their own private advantage through the system, strong private incentives are created for the advancement of undoubted social goods. The political support for the system is assured by the harmony and mututality of these interests. But now what happens if the pursuit of education is no longer seen as the avenue to the purely private, relative,

and individual advantages that it was believed to be? Suppose, in other words, that this benign connection between social benefit and private incentive is fractured? In that break there will occur a quiet, but decisive, revolution. The political support for the system must be transformed.

The view that education pays, that is pays in advancing the quite specific self-interest of individuals, and that it pays at the work place -- this view remains at the heart of the American valuation of education itself. It is furthermore, the view that lies at the heart of our capacity to enlist political support for educational institutions. Yet, it is becoming clearer and clearer that attaining a high school diploma is no big thing to those who have them, and neither is a Bachelor's Degree for many who have them. Yet, such goods remain a desparate necessity for those who do not have them. The expansion of the system itself creates a different valuation of education, and it requires an entirely different kind of political argument. If there is a strong reduction in that demonstrable, touching, and occasionally confirmed belief that more and more education positively advantages individuals, then it becomes increasingly difficult to see how the aggregate of individual interests can continue to be translated into political support for educational institutions. The fidelity of that group who support the system out of essentially parental interests will be weakened.

There remains, of course, the possibility of building a political argument on an appeal to education as a social good. Yet, such an argument, whatever its details, can be no stronger than the social interests on which it rests, and the human disposition to pursue the interests of remote others is notoriously weaker, however more noble, hen their devotion to their own. Furthermore, though the pursuit of individual advantages through education is always a long-term venture, the social benefits are usually even more remote. In such matters one speaks of decades and generations, a length of time unlikely to possess much political appeal. The social argument for the support of the system, however sound it is, is likely to have political strength only if it can be supplemented by other arguments appealing to individual interests or to the fundamental interests of the state.

Finally, there is the prospect of developing a political argument based solely upon the acquisition of educational benefits for their own sake. It is hard to imagine, however, what that argument might be. It might constitute an argument in support of the freedom of all persons to learn, read, study, and practice new skills in much the same way that we preserve their freedom to go to the movies or to attend public worship. Such an argument is less likely to endorse the public support of the system and more likely to simply aim at removing barriers to its existence within whatever limits are permitted by the compelling and derived interests of the state.

These then are the considerations leading to the rank order that we have given to the political arguments for the support of the system. The strongest in an argument lodged in the interests of the state. The next strongest is an argument lodged in the aggregate of private, individual or parental interests. Third strongest is one that makes an appeal to social goods and social interests,[2] and the weakest is an argument that appeals to those interests, whatever they are, that lead to the pursuit of educational goods for their own sake.

These arguments, of course, never appear in total independence of one another. Arguments for the preservation of state interests are never totally quiescent, even though they are more dominant when those interests seem threatened. There are always those who will be persuaded by a political appeal to social goods. There are probably more, however, who will be persuaded by an argument that seeks advancement of their own private and individual interests. There are

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2. It is interesting to note that social arguments for the support of the U.S. space program focusing on the spill-over benefits of that effort, were not seriously advanced until NASA was faced with budgetary cuts, and that arrangements for the continued support of space exploration, appealing to our interests in simply knowing more, have been unsuccessful except when associated with techniques for surveillance (State interests) or techniques for weather forecasting, mapping, the search for natural resources and for monitoring crop diseases (social benefits). These observations also tend to confirm the rank order of the political arguments that we have set down.

always also those who will support the system simply because it advances our knowledge and spreads the acquisition of educational goods. The strongest argument is one that makes all of these appeals, and in every real-life situation, each is likely to be present in some degree. Nonetheless, any reducation in our capacity to advance one of these arguments is a reducation in our capacity to gain the political support of some constituency.

Where can we place the political arguments for the establishment of minimum standards? Are we concerned with such matters because such standards are clearly essential for the maintenance of civic order or the successful development of individual economic independence? Such arguments can be advanced. But they are not very persuasive. The chances of gaining support for the establishment of minimum standards by an appeal to compelling state interests is not a likely path to follow.

On the other hand, if the opinion is widely shared that the schools are failing the perform the most elementary functions of education, that they are preparing persons to do quite well a great many things that they will have little opportunity or need to do later in life, that they are failing in contrast to teach the essentials of the "three Rs", and finally that the system is failing in these ways, but at increasing cost, then there is a serious problem of legitimacy. Such a combination of considerations is powerful. It is not

in anyone's interest to pay a constantly escalating bill for an enterprise that does not work. Thus, it is possible to assemble a powerful aggregation of individual interests in the support of efficiency. The strongest political argument for the development of minimum standards is an argument advanced in the name of efficiency.

There is this important point to observe about this claim. First of all, a political argument advanced in the name of efficiency is not ordinarily an argument that rests in any clear and compelling state interest. When there exists some overriding state or national interest the usual approach is to say, in effect, "Damn the expense; get the job done." Such times are times of emergency, and the aim of policy is not efficiency, but to resolve the emergency. This is one reason for saying that the political argument for the development of minimum standards is not an argument grounded in compelling state interests. But secondly, we should not that in claiming that such a movement is grounded in the aggregation of individual interests in a wide political constituency, I am not suggesting that there are no educational grounds that can be advanced for the same path of action. On the contrary, educational rather than political arguments may emerge. My only point is that they are likely to have less political weight and are not likely to gain consideration except when they are advanced together with other arguments that do have political weight.

Conclusion: Where do we end up in this extended and difficult analysis? With just this. The movement to establish minimal standards for education is essentially a movement stemming from a political need for more efficient management of the system. It is a movement whose impetus is derived essentially from a political need of elected officials and for the political survival of administrators. It arises in our society because the system has been so successful. This may sound ironic. It is. But the truth of such a claim can be gleaned when we recall that it is the success of the system that transforms what, at one time, were the goals of the system into what are now demonstrably its essential functions. It is this success then that throws the problem of efficient management and the successful discharge of essential functions into the arena of state policy. Whether such a development is desireable can be debated, but it can hardly be doubted that its political life will not extend beyond the public demand for efficient management of constantly escalating minimal needs.